

ROBERT BURNS  
AS A VOLUNTEER

WILLIAM WILL

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# ROBERT BURNS AS A VOLUNTEER

*SOME FRESH FACTS WHICH FURTHER HELP  
TO CONFOUND THE POET'S CRITICS*

BY  
WILLIAM WILL

PRESIDENT OF THE LONDON ROBERT BURNS CLUB



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TO  
MY FELLOW-MEMBERS  
OF THE LONDON ROBERT BURNS CLUB  
(WHICH HAS FOR FIFTY YEARS UPHELD THE FAME  
AND DEFENDED THE NAME OF ROBERT BURNS:  
IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF THE EMPIRE)  
THIS BOOK IS RESPECTFULLY  
DEDICATED

## THE DUMFRIES VOLUNTEERS.

*Tune*—"Push about the Jorum."

Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?  
Then let the loons beware, Sir!  
There's wooden walls upon our seas,  
And Volunteers on shore, Sir.  
The Nith shall run to Corsincon,  
And Criffel sink in Solway,  
Ere we permit a foreign foe  
On British ground to rally!  
We'll ne'er permit a foreign foe  
On British ground to rally.

O let us not, like snarling tykes,  
In wrangling be divided,  
Till, slap! come in an unco loon  
And wi' a rung decide it!  
Be Britain still to Britain true,  
Among oursels united!  
For never but by British hands  
Maun British wrangs be righted!  
No! never but by British hands  
Shall British wrangs be righted.

The kettle o' the Kirk and State  
Perhaps a clout may fail in't!  
But deil a foreign tinkler loon  
Shall ever ca' a nail in't.  
Our father's blude the kettle bought!  
And wha wad dare to spoil it?  
By Heav'ns! the sacrilegious dog  
Shall fuel be to boil it!  
By Heav'ns! the sacrilegious dog  
Shall fuel be to boil it.

The wretch that would a tyrant own,  
And the wretch, his true born brother,  
Who'd set the mob aboon the Throne,  
May they be damn'd together!  
Who will not sing "God save the King"  
Shall hang as high's the steeple;  
But while we sing "God save the King"  
We'll ne'er forget The People!  
But while we sing "God save the King"  
We'll ne'er forget The People.

## Robert Burns as a Volunteer.

FEW men of genius have had to run the gauntlet of criticism more searching, more diverse, and more prolonged than Robert Burns. In his own time it was directed chiefly from a rigid ecclesiastical system, and from the general atmosphere of self-righteousness which that creed encouraged. The criticism has been continued in our own day from totally different angles, the insanity-of-genius school regarding Burns less as a conscious sinner, than as the victim of his own genius; and what may be called the curiosities-of-literature view-point, which finds a fascination in the conflict between his narrow material



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environment and his spacious spiritual vision. Between all the shafts of criticism Burns has become a sorely battered target, and it would need a vast volume to refute the charges that have been brought against him.

The harsh criticism to which Burns has been subjected is due largely to his biographers—never was man more unfortunate in his biographers—who too readily accepted the sordid stories which probably originated in the minds of the poet's political opponents, provincial scandal-mongers, and vindictive victims of that wit which "had always the start of his judgment." These stories, handed from inaccurate biographer to unsuspecting biographer, have become part of the voluminous literature that has gathered about the name of the Inspired Ploughman, and that has been drawn upon by those who have directed their shafts at his character.

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More than sixty years ago the dull-looking "Excise Register of Censures," discovered at Somerset House, rescued one side of the Poet's character, and now, a hundred and twenty-two years after Burns's death, an obscure manuscript volume of the Minutes of the Dumfries Volunteers has come to light to confound the critics still further. The great value of the new discovery lies in this, that the Volunteers set up a standard of discipline in some ways even more rigid than that of the Church, and yet Burns stands the test and comes off with flying colours. His attitude to his military duties shows that his membership was not, as has been suggested, a mere piece of hypocrisy meant to deceive or placate his superiors in the Excise who told him, when he sought to defend his attitude to the French Revolution, that his duty was to act not to think.

Burns's work as a Volunteer has hitherto

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either been minimised or misinterpreted. Several of his biographers attach so little importance to his enlistment in the Royal Dumfries Volunteers that they do not even mention it. Others refer to it only as an explanation of the existence of the song, "The Dumfries Volunteers," or as a proof that the Poet was a patriotic Briton, despite his sympathy with the French people. In point of fact, as we shall see, he was not only an enthusiast but a leader of the movement, and that, too, at a period which has frequently been regarded as the least admirable of his short life.

To say, as has been said by more than one essayist, that Burns became a Volunteer "to prove his loyalty to the Government," is an insult to the memory of the Poet. A military life always had an attraction for Burns. Not only did he as a child "strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bag-



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pipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier," but in 1782, when his flax-dressing venture literally ended in smoke, he consoled himself thus:—

"O, why the deuce should I repine,  
An' be an ill foreboder?  
I'm twenty-three, and five feet nine,  
I'll go and be a sodger."

Writing to Mrs Dunlop in 1787, and referring to a suggestion made by her, he said: "Would the profits of that [second and third editions of his poems] afford, I would take the hint of a military life as the most congenial to my feelings and situation." Again, a year later, he wrote to Miss Margaret Chalmers: "Your friendship I can count on, though I should date my letter from a marching regiment. Early in life, and all my life, I reckoned on a recruiting drum as my forlorn hope."

It will thus be seen that Burns needed no great incitement to take up arms when the call came; and there can be no doubt

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that he became a Volunteer, as so many of his fellow-townsmen and fellow-countrymen did, because he was opposed to the turbulent crowd who would have "set the mob aboon the throne," and wished to do his part in preventing social disorder, and because he believed that his country was in danger of invasion. It was such a crisis as this that would revive the flame kindled in his breast by the story of the Liberator of Scotland, which, as he explained to Dr Moore, the father of General Sir John Moore, "poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest."

Not only did Burns join the Dumfries Volunteers, but, like Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh, he assisted in creating the force; he attended a meeting summoned by the Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of that part of the county, Mr David Staig, the Provost of Dumfries (and the father of

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Jessie Staig, to whom Burns paid several poetical compliments), to discuss how best they could serve their native land in the time of crisis, and when the meeting resolved to form a Volunteer Company, Robert Burns's name was among the signatories to the petition for the necessary permission.

The first entry in the Corps Minute Book referred to, sets out that this meeting, at which the Dumfries Volunteer movement was inaugurated, was held in the Court House, on 31st January 1795. With the Deputy-Lieutenant were his two bailies and the leading professional and business men of the town, the list and subsequent signatories\* including John Syme of Ryedale and James Gray, staunchest of Burns's friends; Dr Maxwell, the friend of the French Revolution; Dr John Harley, John Armstrong, writer,

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\* See note A, page 41.



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who became secretary to the Corps ; Rev. Dr Wm. Burnside\* chaplain to the Corps, minister of St Michael's, where Burns occasionally worshipped ; Rev. Dr Wm. Babington, Episcopal minister in Dumfries ; Thomas White (probably of Dumfries Academy) ; David Newall, solicitor ; Captain John Hamilton, the poet's landlord ; Lieut.-Col. A. S. de Peyster, the "respected Colonel" of the Ode on Life ; Captain John Finnan, in whose company Burns was later enrolled ; James Gracie, banker, the "Gracie, thou

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\* At the meeting Mr Staig produced a letter from Dr Burnside in which the reverend gentleman said that although he did not think it perfectly accorded with his professional character and engagements to enrol among the Volunteers, and, if he did, from his rheumatic ailments he could be of very little use in any active service, yet to show his good wishes towards so useful and laudable a design, he was ready and willing to subscribe for the use of the corps, to be applied as they might think best, a sum equal to what it would cost him to be completely accoutred and fitted out as one of the line. The Rev. Dr Babington made a similar proposal. Both were accepted, and the thanks of the meeting were voted them for "such a genteel offer."

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art a man of worth"; "Old Q's" chamberlain, John McMurdo, writer, whose praises and those of his daughters, a "bonnie Jean" and "Phyllis the Fair," Burns sang; Francis Shortt, town clerk, a lieutenant in the corps, and secretary of the Loyal Native Club, which was pilloried by the poet in the well-known quatrain; Alexander Findlater, his co-worker and superior in the Excise; John Lewars, another Excise officer, and brother of Jessie, who attended Burns on his deathbed, and who is enshrined in "The Toast" and in several other complimentary verses; and David Williamson, the rendering of whose account for the dying poet's volunteer uniform drove him into a paroxysm of anger and the humiliating position of having to beg James Thomson and his cousin James Burness for a few pounds.

The meeting on 31st January declared its "sincere attachment to the happy

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Constitution of Great Britain, and our firm resolution on every occasion to protect the lives and properties of ourselves and fellow subjects from every attempt of the ambitious, designing, and turbulent, who threaten to overturn the laws of our country, and who, by anarchy, sedition, and bloodshed, may endeavour to destroy the sacred bonds of society."

Following this initiatory meeting came another on the 3rd of February, when the offer of service and the rules and regulations \* were signed by each of the sixty - three gentlemen who attended. Among the patriotic three score and three again appears the name of the poet, and it is important, in view of the many statements that have been made as to his want of loyalty, to read in the Minute Book that Burns subscribed his name to the following which, substituting Fifth for

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\* See note B, page 43.



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Third, is precisely what patriotic Britons were subscribing to in the months immediately succeeding the outbreak of the war in 1914 :—

“We . . . hereby declare our sincere attachment to the person and Government of His Majesty King George the Third ; our respect for the happy Constitution of Great Britain. . . . As we are of opinion that the only way we can obtain a speedy and honourable peace is by the Government vigorously carrying on the present war, humbly submit the following proposals to His Majesty for the purpose of forming ourselves into a Volunteer Corps, in order to support the internal peace and good order of the town, as well as to give energy to the measures of the Government.”

There was no hesitancy or half-heartedness about the war policy of Robert Burns and his fellow Volunteers of Dumfries.

One is not surprised to find that Burns

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enrolled himself in a Corps which undertook "to serve . . . during the present war, without pay, and find our own clothing." The man who—as we hold, notwithstanding Stevenson's unsupported and ungenerous suggestion—out of pure love for the lyric repute of his native country, contributed, without fee or reward of any kind, those priceless songs of his to Thomson's collection, would have spurned any proffered fee for preparing himself against the day when a foreign foe might attempt to desecrate the soil of his beloved Caledonia. This and other conditions of service suggest that the spirit, if not the person, of Burns was at the drawing up of the rules and regulations. One rule, for example, gave the rank and file the power, which they exercised, of selecting their own commissioned officers; another made it necessary for every man to run the gauntlet of the ballot by their fellows before enrolment; while, later,

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finer were imposed on officers and men who were absent from drill without good reason, and on those guilty of being the worse for drink while on parade; while insolent men and overbearing officers were also subject to the censure of the committee and the Corps.

On the 21st of February 1795, the first election of captains and lieutenants was held in the Court House—Col. de Peyster had been elected major commandant on the previous day,\*—and again Robert Burns was present, one of the seventy-five men who voted John Hamilton to be first captain; John Finnan to be second captain; and David Newall, Wellwood Maxwell, Francis Shortt and Thomas White to be lieutenants. These commissions were gazetted 24th March 1795.†

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\* See note C, page 47.

† War Office, March 24 [1795]—Dumfriesshire Corps of Volunteers—A. S. de Peyster, Esq., to be major commandant; John Hamilton and John Finnan, Esq., captains; David Newall and Wellwood Maxwell, gentle-



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On the same day as that on which the officers were elected, the meeting having adjourned to the Assembly Rooms, each man was separately balloted for, a majority of votes being necessary for election. It was here, on the 21st of February 1795, that Robert Burns, as an original member, was balloted into the Royal Dumfries Volunteers; but he did not, as has been so often said, celebrate his enrolment by writing "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?" The great national song, which created enthusiasm for the national cause from Maidenkirk to John o' Groats, was not written until the month of April.\* It

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men, first lieutenants; Francis Shortt and Thomas White, second lieutenants.

\* There are two versions of the origin of the song, one being that at a public dinner of the Corps, Burns gave the subtle toast: "Gentlemen may we never see the French, and may the French never see us." Murmurs of disapprobation greeted the toast—in particular an Army captain took great umbrage at it—for many of the Dumfries people suspected Burn's loyalty because

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must not be supposed that those elections and ballots were mere formalities, for there is disagreeable evidence in the Minute Book that in this, as in other matters, the Committee and the Corps took their duties seriously.

The two captains, having been elected, drew the names of the men who were to serve under them; and to John

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of his sympathy with the Revolution. By some the innocent toast was considered seditious, which shows the inflammable state of their minds. On returning home he threw off the patriotic verses, the appearance of which in the *Dumfries Journal* must have been as gall and wormwood to his enemies and as marrow to the bones of his friends.

"The poet had been at a public meeting," says Allan Cunningham in a note to the song, "where he was less joyous than usual; as something had been expected from him, he made these verses when he went home, and sent them with his compliments to Mr Jackson, editor of the *Dumfries Journal*." His friend Stephen Clarke set the words to music, and as has been said, the song was sung from end to end of the country, helped greatly to fill the ranks of the Volunteers, and did more "to stir the mind of the rustic part of the population than all the speeches of Pitt and Dundas, or the chosen Five-and-Forty."

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Finnan, the captain of No. 2 Company, fell the honour of drawing for his company the name of the most illustrious, and one of the most enthusiastic Volunteers which Great Britain's danger and Napoleon's ambition caused to be enrolled in these islands. With him in the same company were his great friends Dr Harley, John Syme, James Gracie and John Lewars.

At the Old Assembly Rooms on the 28th of March, Burns, with fifty-seven others, took the Oaths of Allegiance and signed the "Rules, Regulations and By-laws for conducting themselves in a military capacity."\*

As happens in every well-regulated household or society, the Royal Dumfries Volunteers had their little troubles, and in the first one in the history of the Corps we find Robert Burns figuring. A point of

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\* See Note D, page 49.



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good taste was in dispute, and naturally we find Burns's independence asserting itself. We find him, because his spirit of independence was outraged, taking serious and successful action against the Committee, which held several of his great personal friends, among them Col. de Peyster, Captain Hamilton, Captain Finnan, Lieut. White, James Gracie, John Syme, Wm. McCracken, and Alexander Findlater. As has been said, the Royal Dumfries Volunteers were, by their own desire, an unpaid Corps; but as funds were required for necessary outlays in connection with Corps matters, the Committee, at a meeting on 18th May 1795, appointed several of their number to call on gentlemen and solicit contributions to the Corps funds.

This decision at once met with keen opposition from certain members of the Companies, who sent to the Committee the following letter:—

## Robert Burns

Monday Evening.

Sir,—From what we have learned of the proceedings of our committee to-day, we cannot help expressing our disapproval of the mendicant business of asking a public contribution for defraying the expenses of our Association. That our secretary should have waited on those gentlemen and others of that rank of life who from the first offered pecuniary assistance, meets our idea as highly proper, but that the Royal Dumfries Volunteers should go a-begging with the burnt-out cottager and shipwrecked sailor is a measure of which we must disapprove.

Please, then, sir, to call a meeting as soon as possible and be so very good also as to put a stop to the degrading business until the voice of the Corps be heard.

We have the honour to be

(Here follow 24 names, including that of Robert Burns.)

There is no external evidence that Burns's hand helped to frame the letter, but the whole spirit of the document and of its phrasing suggests that the poet, if he did not actually write it, at least had assisted in its composition.

On the 29th May 1795, a general meeting of the Corps was held to discuss the matter, and it was conceded that the exertions of the Committee were well meant, and that no reflection could be cast

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against the members, but it was agreed that no subscriptions should be taken under a guinea; and the return of all subscriptions below that sum was recommended and the Committee advised to "fall upon some other plan" for providing money taken from volunteering individuals only. No application was to be made "unless to a few independent and wealthy inhabitants who have not come forward with their personal service, and who need not be pointed out, as they are easily known."

Whether or not Burns instigated the opposition to the indiscriminate collection of money for the Corps' upkeep, it is certain that he had been taking a prominent part in the work of the Corps, and had become one of its leading members; for at the first general meeting after this affair he was chosen one of the eight men appointed by the rest of the Corps to manage its affairs. At the meeting in the Assembly Rooms on 22nd August 1795, at which Burns was



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elected to the Committee, sixty members of the Corps were present. Those elected to serve with the Poet were Robert Jardine, Deacon Anderson, John McMorine, Alexander Brown, Thomas Gordon, Wm. Paton and Wm. Laidlaw.

This appointment proves that Burns was highly respected and trusted by his fellow Volunteers, and that he took a keen and active part in the administrative work of the Corps; and there is ample further evidence in this Minute Book that he was no "slacker." The names of the members present at the meetings are not given regularly, but on the occasions on which the attendance roll is inscribed, Robert Burns's name always appears. But there is more conclusive proof that the poet was steadfast in his support of the Corps and that he was conscientious in preparing himself for actual work in the field. As has been said, the Corps in its rules authorised a system of fines for non-attend-

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ance at drill, unless good and sufficient reasons for absence were given. Non-commissioned officers and privates suffered penalties of 1s. for the first offence and 1s. 6d. for succeeding abstentions from drill; and officers paid 2s. 6d. for a first offence and 5s. for each succeeding offence. In addition, as has been said, fines were imposed for inebriety when on parade, and for insolence to superior officers. These fines were freely and sternly enforced by the Committee of which Burns was a member, and by the Committees before and after his appointment, lists of names with the amounts of the fines being given in the Minute Book. Privates and officers appear to have been punished without distinction or favour; and one officer paid repeatedly the penalty for absence from parade. In March 1796, Charles Smith was sentenced by the Committee to a reprimand at the head of the Corps at the next drill for being absent from guard,

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and Smith was ordered to pay a fine of 10s.; and at the same meeting George Christie suffered a like punishment for being drunk under arms, and being guilty of unsoldierlike behaviour. Three men who did not turn out were each fined 5s. for neglect of duty; and the Committee to maintain its own dignity and round off what must have been a strenuous meeting, fined Robert Grainger 5s. for making disrespectful remarks regarding the Committee. One of these culprits (Charles Smith) sent a letter of remonstrance to a general meeting of the Corps, but for his pains was found guilty of prevarication and was expelled the Corps, an order being given that the fact should be published in the *Dumfries Journal*. At one meeting—on 24th August 1795—in the business of which Burns took part, the Committee imposed fines—for non-attendance only—to the extent of £9, 6s., those fined including

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Captain Hamilton, 2s. 6d. ; Lieut Francis Shortt, 7s. 6d. ; and Dr Harley, 1s. The examples quoted prove that no favouritism was shown by the Committee, which makes more important one outstanding fact, namely, that although, at the date of the meeting last mentioned, the Poet had been a member of the Corps for some seven months—six working months at least—not once does the name of Robert Burns appear in a list of those guilty of absenting themselves from drill or for otherwise offending against the rigidly enforced rules.

By means of this Minute Book, whose significance has been overlooked all these years, we are able to trace Burns to, or almost to, his fatal illness, and incidentally to nail to the counter one more of the misstatements of Currie, the Poet's first editor and perhaps most inaccurate biographer, who says: "From October 1795 to the January following, an accidental complaint confined him to the house."



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We shall see that he was attending to the work of the Volunteer Corps in the middle of November. It has been to all his biographers a difficult point to decide when actually the Bard was seized with the long illness which ended fatally. His own letters are somewhat contradictory ; but however that may be, Burns attended a Committee Meeting—his last recorded—on 15th November 1795, at which he took part in the preparation for presentation by the Corps of a Loyal Address to the King. At the Committee Meeting Colonel de Peyster suggested that an address should be presented to His Majesty congratulating him on his happy escape from the late insult upon his sacred person.\* A few members of the Committee had met and made a draft which he submitted, and which was approved by the

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\* The attack on George III. was made in October 1795, when the King was on his way to the House of Lords. One result of the attack was the passing of the Treasonable Attempts Bill.

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Committee — Burns, as has been said, was a member of it, and was present at the meeting—for submission to a General Meeting held at the Court House on the same day. The address was in the following terms, and was passed with unanimity :—

“To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty, the humble address of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers.

“Most Gracious Sovereign,—We, your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects, composing the Corps of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, penetrated by the recent and signal interposition of Divine Providence in the preservation of your most sacred person from the atrocious attempt of a set of lawless ruffians, humbly hope that your Majesty will graciously receive our unfeigned congratulations.

“Permitted by you, Sire, to embody ourselves for the preservation of social tranquility, we are filled with indignation at every attempt made to shake the venerable, and we trust lasting fabric of British Liberty.

“We have directed our Major Commandant to sign this address in the name of the Corps assembled at Dumfries, 5th November 1795.”

So ended Robert Burns’s presence at the Committee meetings ; and it is a singular fact, in view of his known anti-Hanoverian

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opinions, that the Poet's last work as a Committee man of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers was to take part in the presentation of a loyal address in the warm terms just quoted.

If there be any truth whatever in the statement by Cunningham that Burns's accession to the Royal Dumfries Volunteers was objected to by some of his neighbours on account of political feeling—and we have discovered no substantiation of it—the minutes which have been quoted prove completely that the objections were soon overcome. And if Cunningham be right, the fact that the Poet was so soon at the head of the Corps' affairs was a great personal triumph, and a tribute to his whole-heartedness in the cause which, let it always be remembered to his credit, he was one of the first to espouse.

For the light that it throws on the habits of the Poet at a particularly interesting period of his life, this Minute Book of the

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Royal Dumfries Volunteers (gifted to the Ewart Library by the inheritrix of Col. de Peyster's estate) is a most valuable and fortunate find. It is important, for it covers part of the time during which, according to his principal detractor, Henley, he was, because of his vicious habits, an outcast from society; and because of those habits was "burnt to a cinder." Here Henley quotes the words reported by an old man as having been uttered by John Syme, Burns's friend, and reads into them—if ever they were spoken, which is doubtful—a meaning that they probably never had.

If Burns's work during the year 1795, his volunteer year, the year that ended in his fatal illness, which his critics say was the consequence of his drunkenness, be reviewed, we find how impossible the stories are. Is it conceivable that a man, in the condition to which he is said to have descended, could have attended his drills



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regularly for two hours on two days in every week, attended regularly his Committee meetings—his very presence there is proof that the story of social ostracism was a lie—and assisted in transacting the important and exacting business of a new Volunteer Corps, when arms, accoutrements, and the general paraphernalia of such a body had to be provided and maintained? Not only is Burns by this Minute Book proved to have been a man of most regular habits, which coincides exactly with his colleague Findlater's and his friend Gray's testimony, and the "Excise Register of Censures," but during those months he was hard at work on his Excise duties, and had contributed to Scottish song some of its most brilliant gems. During his period of strenuous Volunteering, Burns continued his great work for Scottish song by contributing generously to Thomson's work, still refusing to accept payment because he was rendering

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patriotic work for his native country. Among the numerous songs which he wrote in the busy months of 1795, were the great patriotic song "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?" that trumpet call to Democracy: "A man's a man for a' that"; one of the finest specimens of his humour, "Last May a braw wooer"; one of his immortal love songs, "This is no my ain lassie"; as well as the Heron Ballads. If this strenuous labour—active Volunteering, exacting Excise duties, and the composition of at least three of his greatest songs, all in the compass of some ten months—be the record of a decadent, we should pray that to Scotland might be born to-day another such decadent.

No; the truth is that though Burns was not a heavy or a habitual drinker, his craving for convivial company led him occasionally to drink too much—which in his verse he glorified and exaggerated—and that he had many enemies who did

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not hesitate to enlarge upon his occasional excesses. He was a man of great individuality and consequently he attracted great attention. The "fierce light that beats upon a throne" was nothing to the fierceness of the local light that searched every cranny of the life of the man who died in the humble home in the Mill Vennel of Dumfries. The searchlight discovered blemishes. It could not be otherwise. Burns was nothing if he was not open. There was no hypocrisy in his composition. He was a seer, far ahead of his fellows, and consequently misunderstood by many. He was a political revolutionary, and therefore looked at askance and suspected by many of his contemporaries. He had a vitriolic tongue and pen which he used remorselessly on occasion on those whom he did not like; and those victims of his "rough" tongue, human nature, even in Dumfries, being what it was, lost no opportunity of

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retaliating by improving and spreading tales of his dissipation ; tales, some of them, which were merely *oral* half a century after the poet's death, yet believed, in spite of the *written* evidence of his contemporaries that he seldom drank to excess, that he was deeply interested in his family's welfare and education, that he was a highly respected citizen, and in conversation a moral purist. That many doors in Dumfries were shut to Burns we need not doubt, but the doors that were closed to him were not closed because of his dissipation. His political opinions being what they were, his caustic epigrams and epitaphs on men and women, created a sufficient number of enemies, and consequently the ground was ready for the seed sown by those who wished to malign him. Because they hated his politics, groaned under his castigations, and were unable to retaliate in kind, they took the arrows which Burns himself



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made, put poison on the tips, and drove them into the reputation of the greatest genius of his day ; his biographers turned them in the wound, and the sore is being healed up only now. Is it too much to hope that the facts here presented from the manuscript Minute Book of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, in the Ewart Library, Dumfries, and the deductions therefrom, will help somewhat towards healing the wound ?

NOTES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON ROBERT BURNS AS A VOLUNTEER TAKEN FROM THE MANUSCRIPT MINUTE BOOK OF THE ROYAL DUMFRIES VOLUNTEERS.



## NOTES

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### *Note A.*

#### ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL DUMFRIES VOLUNTEERS.

LIST OF INHABITANTS OF DUMFRIES WHO ATTENDED  
THE INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE ROYAL  
DUMFRIES VOLUNTEERS, ON 31ST JANUARY  
1795.

John Syme.	Benjamin Bell.
John Harley.	Kinloch Winlaw.
John Armstrong.	Henry Clint.
Hugh McCornock.	James Stott.
Thomas Gordon.	Captain John Hamilton.
Thomas White.	Lt.-Col. A. S. de Peyster.
Robert Clugston.	Captain John Finnan.
Andrew Smith.	William Laidlaw.
Rev. Dr Wm. Babington.	Samuel Clark, junior.
John Kennedy.	William Hyslop, junior.
George Duncan.	William Boyd.



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Simon Mackenzie.	John Hogg.
John McMorine.	James Gray.
James Gracie.	Deacon Alexander Lookup.
James Denniston.	Robert Jackson, junior.
Thomas Glendinning.	Robert Primrose, junior.
William Paton.	William Hyslop (1).
David Williamson.	Alexander Brown.
James Mundell.	William Hyslop (2).
John Aiken.	William Manderson.
William Johnston.	David Blount.
James Grieve.	John Brand.
James Rae.	William McCracken.
George Grieve.	Edward Hyslop.
John Ferguson.	Robert Grainger.
Riddell McNaught.	John McCracken.
James Graham.	Thomas Hood.
William Richardson.	Alexander Douglas.
Hugh Maxwell.	Robert Burns.
Wellwood Maxwell.	John Lawson, junior.
Convener Wm. Hayland.	William Hamilton, junior.
Deacon Robert Anderson.	

LIST OF THOSE WHOSE NAMES WERE ADDED ON  
3RD FEBRUARY 1795 TO THE ABOVE, AND  
FORMED PART OF THE ORIGINAL CORPS.

John McMurdo.	John W. Maxwell.
Francis Shortt.	Edward Maxwell.
Thomas Williamson.	John Weems, junior.
David Newall.	John Coulthard.

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Samuel Johnston.	John McVitie.
James Spalding.	John Kerr.
William Selkirk.	Thomas Boyd.
Frazer Richardson.	William Thomson.
James McClatchie.	Robert Spalding.
A. Findlater.	Thomas Halliday.
Alex. Copland.	John Caird, junior.
Andrew Johnstone.	Leonard Smith.
William Wallace.	Thomas Grierson.
John Lewars.	

### *Note B.*

#### OFFER OF SERVICE AND CONDITIONS.

At the meeting in the Court House, Dumfries, on 3rd February 1795, at which Mr Staig presided, the Offer of Service and Rules and Regulations passed unanimously, signed, and sent to the Lord Lieutenant for the King's acceptance, are in the following terms :—

“ Offer of Service by certain Loyal Inhabitants of the Town of Dumfries, and Rules, Regulations, and Bye-laws framed for their Government in a Military Capacity—

“ We the subscribers, all inhabitants of the burgh and neighbourhood of Dumfries, within the County

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of Dumfries, do hereby declare our sincere attachment to the person and government of His Majesty King George the Third; our respect for the happy Constitution of Great Britain; and our firm resolution on every occasion to protect the lives and properties of ourselves and our fellow-subjects from every attempt of the ambitious and turbulent who threaten to overturn the laws of our country, and who, by anarchy, sedition, and bloodshed may endeavour to destroy the sacred bonds of society; and, as we are of opinion that the only way we can obtain a speedy and honourable peace is by the Government vigorously carrying on the present war, humbly submit the following proposals to His Majesty for the purpose of forming ourselves into a Volunteer Corps, in order to support the internal peace and good order of the town, as well as to give energy to the measures of Government, to wit;—

“1. That we shall form ourselves into a Corps, consisting of two companies of infantry, not exceeding fifty men each, including commissioned and non-commissioned officers, to serve under the Lord Lieutenant for the county of Dumfries, or his deputy for this district, during the present war, without pay, and find our own clothing.

“2. That each person enrolling himself into the

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said Corps shall be approved of by the Lord Lieutenant for the said county or his deputy, and shall take the oath of allegiance.

“3. That each company shall have a Captain and two Subalterns and the whole commanded by a Major-Commandant.

“4. That the Officers shall have a temporary rank from the King.

“5. That the Corps shall be allowed to choose their own officers, who are to be approved by the Lord Lieutenant or his deputy.

“6. That the Corps shall not be obliged to march more than five miles from the town of Dumfries.

“7. That Government shall furnish arms, accoutrements, pipes and drums, and pay one fifer, one drummer, and one drill sergeant for each company, and the Corps shall return their arms and accoutrements when demanded.

“8. That the members of the said Corps engage to serve as aforesaid only when within the burgh or neighbourhood of Dumfries, and called on in aid of a civil magistrate for the preventing or suppressing of riot, tumult or disorder.

“9. That the Corps shall choose the Commissioned



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Officers as aforesaid by ballot; and the Non-Commissioned Officers shall be chosen in the same manner by their respective companies.

“10. That the Corps shall turn out for the purpose of discipline as often as may appear necessary to the Commanding Officer; and shall, when drawn up under arms, observe the most profound silence, pay all due respect to their officers, and implicitly obey orders without reply.

“11. That all persons wishing admission into this Corps shall make application to the Secretary, who shall mention such application before the Committees of Management, a majority of whom shall have power to admit; and upon any offence or impropriety of conduct committed by any of the members of this Association, and a complaint thereof made by any of the Committee, and a proof of such offence or impropriety brought, the said majority shall have it in their power to pass censure or even to expel from the Corps.

“12. That the Corps request to be allowed to assume the name of ‘The Royal Dumfries Volunteers’; and for their uniform to wear a blue coat half lapelled with red cape and cuffs, and gilt buttons with the letters R.D.V. engraved on them; a plain white Cassimere vest, with small gilt buttons; white

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trousers made of Russia tweeling, tied at the ankle ; white stockings ; a black velvet stock ; hair to be worn short, or turned up behind ; a round hat turned up on the left side with a gilt button, a cockade, and a black feather ; their shoes to be tied with black ribbon ; and the only distinction between the officers and privates, in point of dress, is that the Major Commandant and two Captains are to wear two epaulets, and the other Commissioned Officers one."

### *Note C.*

#### COLONEL AND MRS DE PEYSTER.

Colonel Arentz Schuyler de Peyster, who commanded the Royal Dumfries Volunteers during the troublous times of the end of the eighteenth and opening of the nineteenth centuries, was descended from a Huguenot family which had settled in America. He was in the Regular Army, and during the Seven Years' War he commanded at Detroit, Michilimacinac, and in Upper Canada. It was his great tact and decision that enabled Colonel de Peyster to break the Indians from the French service. For some time he commanded the 8th Regiment, and as Colonel he retired to Dumfries,

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the native place of Mrs de Peyster, who was a sister of Mr John M'Murdo, one of Burns's great friends and fellow-volunteers, and Chamberlain to the Marquis of Queensberry. To the Colonel's home, Mavis Grove, Burns was always a welcome visitor, and the fact that the Colonel also courted the Muses formed a further link with the National Poet. The social unrest and the threatened invasion by the French were the causes of the old war-horse again taking up the sword, and although he was over sixty when he took command of the Dumfries Volunteers, he very soon had the Regiment in a state of great efficiency. From the Minute Book of the Corps, which has been so freely quoted from in this work, we take this extract from a Minute of 20th February 1795: "That Colonel de Peyster shall be Major Commandant of the Corps, who, being present, accepted thereof." At a meeting on the following day called for the selection of officers, the Colonel said he was truly sensible of the honour done him in electing him Major Commandant; and to show her appreciation Mrs de Peyster would provide a stand of colours to be embroidered "with such figures and emblems of loyalty as the Volunteers shall suggest." Mrs de Peyster requested that they would accept the flag as a free gift from her. The meeting considered that a great honour had been

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conferred on the Corps. The colours were presented with great ceremony on the Square of Dumfries, on the King's Birthday in 1795. The Rev. Dr Burnside, after prayer, congratulated the Corps on its splendid discipline for which Colonel de Peyster's persistence in drilling had to be thanked.

### *Note D.*

#### RULES AND REGULATIONS SIGNED BY VOLUNTEERS ON TAKING THE OATH.

On the 28th March 1795, in the Old Assembly Rooms, the Deputy Lord Lieutenant, Mr David Staig, presided over a meeting of fifty-nine members (including Robert Burns) who took the oath of allegiance.

The following "Rules, Regulations, and Bye-laws for conducting themselves in a military capacity which they fully considered" were adopted and signed by those present :—

" 1st.—All resolutions of the Corps, in a body, are to be decided by a majority of votes by ballot.

" 2nd.—Every member admitted must take the oaths to His Majesty, previous to having his arms

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delivered to him. And he is expressly debarred from wearing his side-arms except when called out for the purpose of drilling, or upon other duty ; and no member to appear at the drill in any degree the worse of liquor.

“3rd.—The dress of the Corps shall remain as fixed in the offer of service—at least no alteration shall be made therein without concurrence of four-fifths of the Corps—and as an exact uniformity in this respect is obviously necessary, no deviation from it can be permitted, excepting that white cassimere breeches, buckled at the knee, and half gaiters conform to a pattern now shown by Colonel de Peyster, shall be substituted in place of white Russia tweel trousers, as formerly agreed on.

“4th.—The Corps shall wear their uniforms on general field days, and may wear them on Sundays or on public occasions, such as the King and Queen’s Birthday, assemblies, etc., and on any other occasion they may think proper.

“5th.—The Corps may provide themselves with short blue jackets, and with red shoulder straps, capes and cuffs, to be worn in the mornings or, on ordinary occasions, with white vests and nankeen trousers buttoned at the ankle ; and the whole to be uniform.



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“6th.—The uniform of the officers, non-commissioned, and private shall be the same, with this distinction, that the officers shall wear swords and epaulets; and the sergeants, drummers, and fifers, swords only. And when there are no military in town, the drums and fifes to beat the morning and evening duty.

“7th.—The colours (which have been presented to the Corps by Mrs De Peyster) shall be placed in the custody of the Major Commandant.

“8th.—Every member of the Corps obliges himself to turn out, for the purpose of drilling, when his attendance is desired by the commanding officer, such musters, however, not to exceed two hours in each day, nor two days in each week; and the hours most likely not to interfere with business to be appropriated for these purposes; and the days of meeting to be Friday and Saturday at six in the evening.

“9th.—The Corps when arrived at such a state of discipline as to think themselves entitled, by a majority of votes, to demand to be reviewed by an officer of such rank as generally presides on such occasions, after being so reviewed, or qualified to meet it, shall not be called above one day in each

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fortnight or more than two hours in that day, for the purpose of drilling.

“10th.—The Corps shall appoint a new committee, consisting of the two captains and four lieutenants and of eight non-commissioned officers or privates, to be elected; the major commandant or senior officer present to preside on all occasions, and to have the casting vote in case of an equality; and nine to be a quorum. The committee to continue three months.

“11th.—This Committee shall have jurisdiction in all matters of offence committed against the Corps by any of its members, the punishment to extend only to fine, censure, or expulsion from the Corps; and in certain cases, may extend the punishment to publishing his name and offence in the *Dumfries Weekly Journal*.

“12th.—This Committee shall deliberate on all matters respecting the Corps. In cases of fine and censure its resolutions to pass by a majority of votes and be decisive; but in questions of expulsion, etc., by the concurrence of three-fourths of the Committee, or quorum present—and in this case an appeal to lay to the whole Corps, on the application of the dissenting members.

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“ 13th.—When the Corps is called out on ordinary field days, for the purpose of drilling, defaulters or absentees on such musters who cannot assign a just and necessary cause of absence to his commanding officer shall be fined in the following sums, viz., non-commissioned officers and privates one shilling for the first offence, and one shilling and sixpence for every offence thereafter; commissioned officers of every rank, two shillings and sixpence for the first offence, and five shillings for every subsequent offence, but these fines shall not operate against members confined by indisposition, or on journeys of more than seven miles from Dumfries.

“ 14th.—That the fines so levied shall be paid to the commanding officer of each Company, and an account of their amount to be kept by the sergeant-major; such amount to be submitted once a month to the inspection of the committee, who shall direct the expenditure thereof.

“ 15th.—The commanding officer to be bound to call a meeting of the committee on the application of any five members in writing.

“ 16th.—The Corps, in case of riot, insurrection, accidental fire, public rejoicing, or other necessary occasions to be bound to turn out under arms, on

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the call of the commanding officer for the time, on an application to him by the civil magistrates of the town or on requisition of the Lord Lieutenant of the County, or his deputy for this district, in case the service of the Corps is required in the country as stated in their offer of service ; and in cases of fire the beat of the town drum to be the signal for every member to repair under arms to the alarm post, which the commandant will appoint, dressed in their morning jackets.

“ 17th.—Any member of the Corps guilty of insolence to his superior officer, whilst on duty to be subject to fine or censure, or expulsion, if the committee consider the case to merit it.

“ 18th.—Any officer guilty of tyrannical behaviour towards any member of the Corps, whilst on duty, to be punished by fine and censure at the discretion of the committee.

“ 19th.—Any centinel or private quitting his post when called out upon duty, to be liable to the highest penalty that can be inflicted ; and any officer or private abandoning his post when on duty to be subject to the same.

“ 20th.—Any centinel or private suffering himself to be surprised on duty, or losing his arms, to be subjected in the same manner.

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“21st.—Any member exciting others to neglect their duty, or raising cabals in the Corps, to be subject to the same.

“22nd.—No discharge shall in future be granted to any member unless he pay twenty guineas towards the incidental expenses of the Corps, except such as from unavoidable causes shall be obliged to remove their residence, in which case they are virtually discharged.

“23rd.—Any member having occasion to be absent from town for the space of one week or more, and who upon that account cannot attend the muster during that time, shall be bound to give notice thereof to the Commanding Officer of his Company, upon pain of being fined as in the case of unnecessary absence.

“24th.—In the event of vacancies happening in the commissioned or non-commissioned officers' departments, every member in the Corps subscribing these regulations, and these only are eligible to the succession whatever their rank may be.

“25th.—The Commandant may give occasional necessary orders for the economy and good discipline of the Corps, viz. forming and sizing the companies, care and occasional repair of arms and accoutrements,



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occasionally altering a drill day or the hour thereof, and such small matters as must necessarily occur, provided they do not in any wise militate against the intent of the foregoing resolution.

“Lastly.—The Corps reserve to themselves liberty to make such new regulations and bye-laws, or to make such alteration on the present, as a majority of them may afterwards think proper. In testimony of all which the Corps have subscribed the foregoing resolution at Dumfries, the twenty-eighth day of March, in the year one thousand and seven hundred and ninety-five, having at the same time taken the oaths to His Majesty.”





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Robert Burns as a volunteer

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